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ABSTRACT

A sample of 1,172 cases of both confirmed and unconfirmed child abuse was analyzed in an attempt to identify major demographic variables which might be associated with differential case handling. The data were collected by transferring previously recorded information on child injury cases from state central registries to a standardized form. The majority of cases involved children under 6, males, and whites, although the more serious injuries tended to be suffered by children under 3, males, and blacks. It was found that most children were abused by their own parents in their own homes and that parents tended to abuse children of their own sex. When the data on cases of confirmed versus suspected abuse were examined, two types of differential case handling were indicated. First, female perpetrators tended to inflict more serious injuries but were less frequently confirmed as abusers, thus raising the question of greater leniency toward female perpetrators. Second, the disproportionately larger percentage of cases confirmed as abuse for white children under 1 as compared to black children in the same age range suggested that different criteria might be used in handling cases for different racial groups. Neither of these biases were strongly supported, and a replication with a larger sample was recommended. (JMB)

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Child Abuse: Some Findings from the Analysis of 1172 Reported Cases

by

Clara E. Johnson*

One of the most consistent tendencies found in the increasing body of empirical research and descriptive literature on child abuse/neglect is reported findings from small selective samples with considerable attention devoted to characteristics of the abused children and their abusers, usually their parents.** This study has been an attempt to expand the literature in this area by analyzing major demographic variables of a large sample of injured children (n=1172) and their perpetrators according to the disposition of the reported case. None of the previous studies, to the writer's knowledge, have considered this analytical avenue. It would appear to be a necessary function of research in this area to attempt to identify factors which may be associated with differential case handling, i.e., disposition.

Further, this research summary attempts to explore possible associations between selected variables which might give rise to a broader knowledge base and relevant questions for further study in the area.

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**A notable exception is the nationwide study conducted by David G. Gil in 1967; Results may be found in David G. Gil, Nationwide Survey of Legally Reported Physical Abuse of Children. No. 15, Papers in Social Welfare, Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass.: 1968, and Violence Against Children: Physical Child Abuse in the United States. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970.

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Data on which ideas for this paper are based were collected in a study of child abuse in seven of the eight Southeastern states in Region IV--Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Data collection.--Data were gathered through the use of a constructed schedule to which data from the participating states' central registries were transferred. In those states in which project assistance was not requested, the schedules which were mailed to the State offices were completed by personnel in their protective services unit.* In those states in which project personnel were requested to assist in the process, schedules were completed by the states' protective services unit personnel and project personnel who traveled to the separate states for that purpose. The data were collected in the Spring of 1973.

The schedule incorporated data which were basically divided into five areas: 1) background data on the injured children, 2) data concerning the reported incident, 3) data which described the nature and extent of injuries, 4) background data on the parent/substitute(s), and 5) data on the alleged perpetrator(s).

The initial sampling design included the collection of data on the total population of reported cases in the Region for the period January 1, 1968 through December 31, 1972. Due to the unanticipated scope of the study which was not accurately predicted from our estimates, limited time and manpower, and an SRS policy prohibiting the collection of data on any state's total caseload whereas project personnel were requested to assist in the data collection process, we revised our sampling design to include the total population of cases only in those states requesting no assistance from project personnel. In those states having the largest number of reported cases and requiring assistance in transferring record information to the schedule, a thirty percent random sample was drawn.**

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*In South Carolina the schedules which were mailed to the state office were sent to the counties where central registries are maintained by state law.

**The final sample was comprised of 1,172 cases. A case qualified for inclusion in the study if it were a case which was reported to the central registry and could not be deleted for any of the following reasons: 1) unquestionable evidence pointed to accidental causes; 2) sexual abuse was unaccompanied by other physical injury; 3) unintentional neglect; and 4) rare (including matters of custody) reports. Deletions were made after the samples were drawn. Cases were not limited to those in which injuries were inflicted by parents or caretakers, nor to those in which abuse was confirmed.

Findings

I. Characteristics of the Injured Children

Age, Sex, Race.--The regional age distribution varied minimally from the national distribution found in the 1967 Gil study. Of the 1,153 cases for which age was known, 57.3 percent of the injured children were under six years of age; 36.1 percent of the children were under three years of age. Comparable percentages from the national survey were 54.0 and 34.0, respectively. In the present study 23.5 percent were ten years of age or older in comparison to 25.0 percent in the earlier nationwide survey.

While statistical tests were not significant for the association between age and case status, a discernible pattern was noted. With the exception of the age category--ten years but less than twelve--all age categories included a higher percent of confirmed abuse than did the under one year of age group. There were more under age one classified as uncertain. On the other hand, with the exception of the age group--twelve years but less than fourteen, abuse was less likely to be ruled out in cases involving children under six years of age than for the ten years and older. These findings tend to suggest that while it is more difficult to confirm abuse in the very young it is less likely that abuse is ruled out.

The sex distribution of the sample closely corresponded to that found in the Gil study. Of the total, 54.3 percent were male, 45.0 female, and for 8 or 0.7 percent sex was unknown. By case status, 67.2 percent of the cases involving boys represented confirmed abuse and in 69.8 percent of the cases involving girls, injuries were classified as confirmed abuse. Abuse was ruled out in a slightly higher percentage of cases involving boys (8.2 percent) than in those involving girls (6.8 percent). Of 39 cases in which no follow-up was indicated, 4.1 percent represented injuries to boys as compared to 2.4 percent girls.

Based on a total of 1,053 cases for which information on race was available,** 73.1 percent were white, 24.5 percent black, 0.9 percent other, and 1.5 percent unknown. This racial compositon roughly corresponds to Gil's

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*Space does not permit the presentation of results in tabular form. Constructed tables will be supplied upon request.

**This attrition was due primarily to the large number of cases in Tennessee's sample which were reported on an older form on which race was not included.

findings of the study cohort--65.0 percent white, 30.0 percent non-white, and 5.0 percent unknown. However, when C.L. noted the racial composition from his sample communities which included nine of the country's largest cities, he found a significant difference: 36.1 percent white, 48.1 percent black, and 17.8 percent other. We failed to note, however, such a drastic change in racial composition when we considered case from two of the largest cities in the Southeast--60.0 percent white and 40.0 percent non-white.

In 63.7 percent of the cases involving white children, injuries were classified as confirmed abuse as compared to 71.0 percent of the black children. Five or 62.5 percent of the children classified as other were judged abused. Abuse was ruled out in 9.8 percent of the cases involving white children and in 5.1 percent involving black children. Uncertainty was the case dispositon in 23.3 percent of the white cases and 18.4 percent of the black. 3.2 percent and 5.4 percent of the cases were not followed-up, white and black respectively.

Age and Sex.--Male children reported were somewhat younger than females; 60.3 percent male to 55.1 percent female were under six years of age, and 38.4 percent males to 34.4 percent females were under the age of three. On the other hand, for the children reported over the age of ten, 27.6 percent were female, 20.2 percent male. This sex--age difference was especially noted in the fourteen to under eighteen age group--6.0 percent male to 14.2 percent female.

The analysis of age and sex, controlling for case status, revealed that a higher percentage of females was adjudged abused in every age group with the exception of the age groups, less than one and fourteen to under eighteen.

Race and Age.--Whereas a higher percentage of black children than white children was adjudged abused, this observation did not persist when age was considered. The injuries which the youngest black children sustained were less likely classified as confirmed abuse than those sustained by the white children. Black children, ten years and older, however, were adjudged abused more often than were white children.

Of the white children under the age of one (n=120), 77 or 64.2 percent represented confirmed abuse cases in comparison to 21 or 48.8 percent of the black children (n=43). Considering children under the age of two, we found that 64.5 percent of the white children (n=197) were adjudged abused, and 60.9 percent of the black children (n=64). Noting the other case dispositions for cases of children under the age of two, we found that abuse was ruled out in a slightly higher percentage of cases involving white children (8.1 percent) than in those involving black children (6.2 percent). Uncertainty was the case disposition for 47 or 23.9 percent of the white children under age two and 17 or 26.5 percent of the black children. No follow-up was indicated for 6 or 3.0 percent of the white children and 4 or 9.3 percent of the black children.

For older children, we found that in the age group--ten years to less than fourteen--64.6 percent of the white children (n=96) represented confirmed abuse cases; abuse was ruled out in 10.4 percent of the cases; uncertainty was indicated for 22.9 percent; and no follow-up was inducated for only 2.1 percent. For black children in this age group (n=41), 78.0 percent of the cases represented confirmed abuse; in only one case (2.4 percent) was abuse ruled out; uncertainty was the disposition in 14.6 percent of the cases; and 2 cases or 4.9 percent were not followed-up. Similar results were noted for children between the ages of fourteen and eighteen.

2. Seriousness of Injuries by Age, Sex, and Race

Seriousness and Age.--Approximately thirty-six percent of the children in the present study were under three years of age. These youngest aged children undoubtedly suffered the most seriously. Of the all children under the age of three 190 or 46.2 percent were seriously injured (exluding 15 fatality cases). Of the 190 children who were seriously injured, confirmed abuse was the case disposition in 68.9 percent of the cases. Abuse was ruled out in only 2.1 percent of the cases. In 25.3 percent of the cases, uncertainty was the disposition and no follow-up was indicated for 3.7 percent. There were 357 children for which we had relevant data between three and eight years of age. Seventy-seven or 21.6 percent of these children were seriously injured, of which 76.6 percent represented confirmed abuse cases. Abuse was ruled out in only one case (1.3 percent), 16.9 percent uncertain, and 5.2 percent not followed-up. Noting the age group, eight but less than twelve (n=171), only 10.5 percent were seriously injured, of which 88.8 percent were confirmed abuse cases. In none of these cases was abuse ruled out; and in only 2 or 11.2 percent was uncertainty the disposition.

A significant negative association was found between the degree of seriousness and age in the abuse confirmed, abuse ruled out, and uncertain case status categories.*

In terms of types of injuries, older children primarily sustained such injuries as bruises and welts, abrasions and contusions, and wounds and cuts. Younger children, while sustaining more than their share of the above types of injuries, more often suffered from the most serious types of injuries than did the older children.

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*Statistics by case status:

Abuse confirmed	Ruled out	Uncertain
X^2 = 128.221 significant under .001, 27df R (correlation) = -0.090 sig. at .013	X^2 = 36.389 sig. at .05, 24df	R (corr.) = -0.144 sig. at .027

Of the 21 children sustaining sprains and/or dislocations, 52.4 percent were under age three, 4.8 percent between three and six, 33.8 percent between six and ten, and 9.5 percent between ten and fourteen. There were 68 cases of burns; 54.4 percent of the children were under the age of three, 25.0 percent between three and six, 17.6 percent between six and ten, and 1.5 percent between ten and fourteen and fourteen and eighteen. Of the 33 children sustaining internal injuries, 57.6 percent were under three years of age, 21.2 percent between three and six, 6.1 percent between six and ten, 12.1 percent between ten and fourteen, and 3.0 percent between fourteen and eighteen. Of the 106 bone fracture cases (excluding skull fractures), 81.1 percent were under age three, 6.6 percent between three and six and six and ten, and 2.8 percent between ten and fourteen and fourteen and eighteen. Skull fractures was sustained by 47 children of which 89.2 percent were under the age of three, 8.5 percent between three and six, and 2.3 percent between six and ten. There were 50 cases of hemorrhage/hematoma; 80.0 percent of the children were less than three years old, 8.0 percent between three and six, 10.0 percent between ten and fourteen, and 2.0 percent between fourteen and eighteen. Of the 13 cases in which brain damage occurred, 92.3 percent of the children were under age three and 7.7 percent between three and six.

By case disposition for the above types of injuries, all cases involving children six years and older were classified as confirmed abuse with the exception of one case of sprains/dislocation and two burns and scaldings which were designated uncertain. On the other hand for the children under three, 66.6 percent of the sprains and dislocations represented confirmed abuse, 71.4 percent of the burns and scaldings, 84.6 percent of internal injuries, 63.2 percent of the bone fractures, 70.0 percent of the skull fractures, 67.6 percent of hemorrhage/hematoma, and 88.8 percent of the brain damage.

Seriousness and Sex.--While we found so statistically significant association between designated degree of seriousness and sex by case status, we noted that a slightly higher percentage of males fell in the serious and unknown categories and a higher percentage of females in the not serious and fatal categories.

Boys suffered more of the serious types of injuries than did girls. Boys represented 73.9 percent of the cases of sprains and dislocations, girls 26.1 percent. Forty-three or 62.3 percent of all burns were sustained by males. Of the 109 cases of bone fractures, 57.8 percent were cases involving male children. Skull fractures were sustained by 54.1 percent males to 45.9 percent females. Males sustained 76.9 percent of the brain damage injuries and 52.0 percent of hemorrhage/hematoma. A slightly higher percentage of females suffered internal injuries (51.5 percent).

While a slightly higher overall percentage of the cases involving females was confirmed than cases involving males (69.8 percent female, 67.2 percent male), cases in which serious injuries were sustained were more often designated confirmed abuse when males were injured than when females were injured.

Seriousness and Race.--A higher percentage of the black children were seriously injured than white children. We found that 65.6 percent of the cases involving white children were not serious, 24.9 percent serious, and 1.9 percent fatal (n=756). For black children (n=255), 53.3 were not serious, 37.3 percent serious, and 2.7 percent fatal.

Of the 188 serious cases involving white children, 72.3 percent represented confirmed abuse. Nine or 64.3 percent of the fatalities were judged to have resulted from abusive acts. Of the 95 serious cases involving black children, 76.8 percent were confirmed abuse cases, and four or 57.1 percent of the fatalities.

3. Perpetrators of the Injuries to the Children

Identity of Perpetrators.--There were 1,271 perpetrators who were either suspected or established to have been involved in the injuring of the 1,172 children. Of the 1,271 perpetrators, 1,123 were adjudged the main perpetrator; in 145 cases there was a second, and in 3 cases there was a third.

In 1,117 cases for which we had case disposition the identity of the perpetrator(s) was either suspected (286) or established (831). We found a statistically significant association between the identity status of the perpetrator and the case disposition ($X^2 = 241.592$, $df = 6$, $P < .001$). Cases in which the identity was established were more likely to be designated as abuse than those in which perpetrators were neither known nor suspected. Similarly, in fewer of these cases abuse was ruled out, deemed uncertain, or case was not followed up. We noted further that all established perpetrators were not "conceptualized" as abusers and abuse was confirmed in cases where the identity was neither known nor suspected and suspected.

Relationship of the Main Perpetrators to the Injured Children.--For the most part, injuries occurred in the children's own home and were perpetrated by their parent or parent substitute. Of the 1,123 main perpetrators, 42.5 percent were mothers or mother substitutes and 48.9 percent were fathers or father substitutes. These findings were in contrast to those found in the Gil study, 45.28 percent mother or mother substitute and 43.96 percent father or father substitute.

Of a total of 965 natural mothers living in the injured children's home, 41.1 percent were reportedly abusers. Of these, 257 or 64.7 percent represented cases of confirmed abuse. Of 54 stepmothers, 27 or 50.0 percent were reportedly child abusers, of which 62.9 percent were confirmed abusers. Of 648 natural fathers, 56.9 percent were reported to have abused their children; 72.4 percent represented confirmed abuse cases. There were 208 stepfathers; 65.4 percent were involved in reported abusive incidents of which 77.9 percent were confirmed abuse cases.

It appears from our findings that male parents or parent substitutes were more often involved in injuring children than were female parents or parent

substitutes. Cases in which males were involved were more often classified as confirmed abuse and less often ruled out.* A deviation from this pattern involved both "other mother" and "other father substitutes." Cases in which other mother substitutes were the designated perpetrator were more often confirmed than when the perpetrator was either the natural mother or the stepmother. In cases involving other father substitutes, injuries were less often confirmed as abuse than when the natural father or the stepfather was involved.

Relationship of the Main Perpetrators by Race.--According to earlier discussions, male parents or parent substitutes were more often involved in the injuring of children than were female parents or parent. This finding did not persist when we held race of perpetrator constant. Of the black perpetrators, 55.4 percent were female parents or parent substitutes, 34.7 percent male. For white parents or parent substitutes, 37.9 percent were female and 54.0 percent male. In relation to these findings, it is important to point out that black families were more often father less than white families. Thus, it probably follows that mothers in black families were more often involved in incidents of abuse than black fathers.

Age of the Main Perpetrators.--Approximately 60.0 percent of the main perpetrators were over the age of 25. Abuse was most often confirmed when perpetrators were over the age of 25. The single age category reported as perpetrators most often, however, was age 21-25. It was in this age group and under 20 year old categories that the lowest percentages of confirmed abuse cases existed.**

Sex of the Perpetrators by Sex of the Injured Children.--The data, in which the association between the sex of the perpetrators and the sex of the injured children was noted without holding case status constant, suggested a statistically significant association ($X^2 = 9.215$, $df = 1$, $p = .01$). Succinctly, perpetrators tended to injure children of their own sex.

We noted the association between these variables by the designated case status. The pattern generally persisted. We found a slight association in in the confirmed abuse cases ($X^2 = 3.066$, $df = 1$, $p = .07$) and a statistically significant association in the uncertain category ($X^2 = 5.237$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$).

Seriousness of Injuries by Sex of Perpetrators.--We determined in a previous section that while males tended to inflict injuries on children more

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*A statistically significant association existed between sex of the perpetrator and case status ($X^2 = 19.699$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$).

**Undoubtedly, this is related to the fact that these parents' children would be the youngest. We noted earlier case disposition by age of children.

than females, cases in which male perpetrators were indicated were more often designated confirmed abuse. Having made this observation, we noted the differences in the severity of injuries by the sex of perpetrators. There was not an overall statistically significant association; there was, however, a discernible pattern of interest and concern. A higher percentage of males were involved in injuries which were not serious and in injuries for which the severity was not known. On the other hand, a slightly higher percentage of females was indicated when injuries to the children were serious and considerably higher in fatal cases. These observations were made without respect to case status. This pattern held for the confirmed abuse cases for which a significant association was found (X^2 = 10.556, df = 3, p = .015).

Seriousness of Injuries by the Relationship of the Perpetrators.--Of 295 serious cases for which we had relevant data, 68.1 percent were reportedly perpetrated by the natural mother. Of the 295 serious cases, 78.3 percent were confirmed abuse. Natural mothers were indicated in 83.0 percent of the 226 serious confirmed abuse cases, stepmothers in 2.6 percent (n=6), and "other mother substitutes" in 3.1 percent (n=7). Natural fathers were involved in 29.4 percent, stepfathers in 10.5 percent, and "other father substitutes" in 9 or 3.9 percent.

Noting the findings from the standpoint of serious injuries as a percent of total injuries perpetrated by each parent or parent substitute category, we found that while cases in which natural mothers and stepmothers were indicated were less often classified as confirmed abuse, 64.6 percent and 62.9 percent, respectively, natural mothers and stepmothers were responsible for the highest percentages of confirmed cases of serious injuries and fatalities. Of 254 confirmed cases involving natural mothers, 98 or 38.6 percent were of a serious nature and 8 or 3.2 percent were fatalities. Six or 35.3 percent (17 confirmed) of the cases in which stepmothers were involved were serious and 1 or 5.9 percent was fatal. A higher percentage of cases in which "other mother substitutes" were implicated was confirmed (77.6 percent). Yet, a much lower percentage of serious cases (7 or 17.0 percent) and no fatalities were noted.

Cases in which male parents or parent substitutes were involved were confirmed more often than those in which natural mothers or stepmothers were involved. Yet, it was noted that males were responsible for a lower percentage of serious and fatality cases. Of the 263 confirmed cases in which natural fathers were involved, 25.6 percent were of a serious nature and 2 or .8 percent were fatal. Stepfathers were involved in 105 cases of confirmed abuse of which 22.9 percent were serious and 2 or 1.9 percent were fatal. Of 29 confirmed cases or 68.9 percent of all cases in which "other father substitutes" were involved, 9 or 31.0 percent were serious and 1 or 3.4 percent was fatal.

By case status, the association between seriousness of injuries and relationship of perpetrators was significant for confirmed abuse cases (X^2 = 38.963, df = 24, p = .029) and for cases designated as Uncertain (X^2 = 45.693, df = 32, p = .058).

Reflections on the Findings

The results reported in this paper are based on a Regional study of child abuse in which data were collected on 1172 reported cases in seven of the eight Southeastern states during the period January 1, 1968 to December 31, 1972. Who was reported, depended, we surmise, on who was injured or perceived to be injured and defined as needing assistance either by the perpetrator or by others. However, more males than females, more children under the age of six, and more whites than blacks were reported. Reflection on case handling indicates that these factors may need further researching as they relate to case disposition.

While more males than females were reported, a higher percentage of males suffered more serious types of injuries, and boys were somewhat younger than girls, a higher percentage of cases in which females were involved was classified as abuse in every age group with the exception of the age groups, less than one and fourteen to under eighteen. These kinds of findings would initially appear to suggest the existence of a sex bias in case disposition reflecting possibly society's tendency to protect females. However, when we noted types of injuries by sex of child we found that cases in which serious types of injuries were sustained were more often confirmed as abuse when males were injured than when females were injured. Thus, we might reconsider the above findings in terms of the pattern we found to exist between seriousness of injuries and sex of perpetrators and between sex of perpetrators and sex of injured children. While female perpetrators were responsible for a slightly higher percentage of serious injuries than were male perpetrators and for a considerably higher percentage of fatalities, and perpetrators tended to injure children of their own sex, cases involving female perpetrators were less often classified as confirmed abuse. Is there, then, a possible sex bias in case handling? Or do more serious injuries involving female perpetrators result from "accidents"? Or are females more adept in explaining away the circumstances surrounding the incident? We suggest that the above victim related variables and the perpetrator related variables need to be further analyzed using large samples which would allow simultaneous control of all relevant variables.

Race of injured children, in terms of case disposition, also caused some reflections. More black children were seriously injured than were white children. And whereas an overall higher percentage of black children was adjudged abused, a disproportionately higher percentage of cases involving white children under the age of one (64.2 percent) was confirmed as compared to black children under the age of one (48.8 percent).* The opposite was found in the

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*Children under the age of one represented 16.8 and 17.2 percent of the total, white and black, respectively. There were 25.9 percent of the white children and 25.6 percent of the black children under the age of two.

older age groups. Are agency definitions and/or criteria for the judging of the existence of abuse different by race? Are the reported incidents surrounding injuries to black children, especially under the age of one and ten and over, vastly different from those in which white children are involved?

Whereas the findings lead to our posing the above questions, we noted that when the seriousness of injuries by race and case status was considered, there was little difference in the percentage of serious cases confirmed as those for blacks and whites. Perhaps, as with sex and case disposition, analyses of larger samples need to be undertaken before we can speak on the issues of race bias and/or differential definition and/or social differences in the circumstances surrounding incidents in relation to case disposition.*

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*While our sample was not large enough to analyze the data controlling simultaneously for relevant variables, we are presently preparing to analyze seriousness of injuries by the relationship of perpetrators controlling for race. Inasmuch as there was a higher percentage of black mothers than white mothers indicated as perpetrators, coupled with the findings that abuse was confirmed less often when mothers were involved, such an analysis as above indicated may give added insight.